



GrowSmart Maine

Annual Report: Fiscal Year 2025



JULY 1, 2024 – JUNE 30, 2025

GrowSmart Maine continues to weave together our advocacy, convenings, and community technical assistance to support communities navigating change in alignment with smart growth. Our programming takes on the current housing crisis through the lens of removing barriers and creating incentives for housing where it makes sense in the long term, for municipalities, residents, and businesses.

The value of smart growth is incorporating economic, community, and environmental priorities so that Mainers can address the housing crisis without undoing the good work of climate resilience, and without creating a crisis in access to farmland and food.

Local successes this year result from strong partnerships with communities across Maine and partner organizations, through programming designed to build capacity at the local level. With funding of **Building Community Strength** from USDA and American Farmland Trust, we provide training

and technical assistance for ten rural communities to develop and implement locally-designed plans that address critical issues like resilience, economic development, affordable housing, and food and farm viability while the **Downeast Food System Partnership** will cultivate a more inclusive, innovative, and integrated food system across the Downeast region.

GrowSmart provides expertise to towns as they address current challenges through Maine's Community Resilience and Housing Opportunity programs. Resilience in this time of change takes many forms, and through smart growth strategies, the overall community is built to last.

As a partner in Maine's Regional and Wabanaki Broadband Partnership, GrowSmart's **Kennebec Broadband Partnership** provided tangible digital literacy and equity tools, including stipends to local organizations to support their digital literacy efforts, and the award of free devices to those

who need digital connections for education, healthcare, and employment.

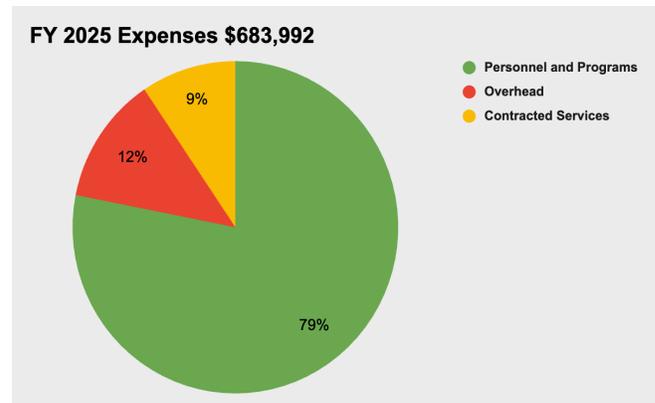
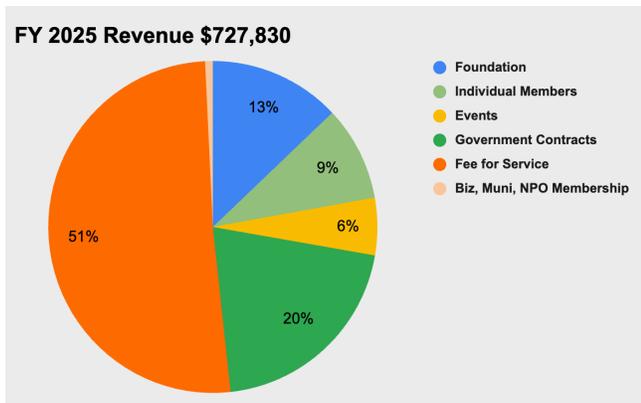
It has been a year of uncertainty as well as successes. Federal funding for additional digital literacy has been withdrawn, so the Kennebec Broadband Partnership will come to a close sooner than anticipated, with much work left undone. Federal programs within the USDA may face closure as well, putting rural communities at risk across the country.

Through our partnerships with aligned organizations and agencies, our work will continue. With committed board members and a talented staff, GrowSmart is charting a course to continue to support Maine towns and cities in creating communities where people can feel safe, that they belong, and that they can thrive.



GrowSmart Maine staff, back row L to R: Harald Bredesen, Program Director; Dayea Shim, Program Coordinator; Joe Oliva, Outreach and Communications Director; Amanda Vermillion, Development and Operations Associate. Front row: Hildie Lipson, Kennebec Broadband Partnership Director; Nancy Smith, CEO.

Nancy E. Smith



Financial Report:

GrowSmart Maine concluded Fiscal Year 2025 with a surplus of \$40K. Much of this is attributed to the timing of payments received and additional support from foundations.

This strong financial position is also due to judicious spending and suspending plans to hire an additional employee, due to the uncertainty of federal program support. Programming has expanded to serve additional communities, with several initiatives launching in the coming year.

GrowSmart Maine is actively engaged in fiscal sponsorship of aligned organizations to support aligned mission-driven initiatives.. This allows start-up projects to focus on programmatic work while we manage fiduciary responsibilities.

In FY2025, we served as fiscal sponsor for Maine Zoning Atlas, Moving Maine Network, Mainers for Smarter Transportation, and Maine Broadband Coalition. GrowSmart Maine also provided administrative guidance for the Maine Redevelopment Land Bank Authority.



Nancy Smith, Harald Bredesen, Dr. Basil Gooden Jr. and municipal officials in the Building Community Strength program at the GrowSmart Summit 2024



Dayea Shim with GrowSmart Board member Mehuman Ernst at the Common Ground Fair



GrowSmart CEO Nancy Smith presenting Policy Action 2025 at the Build Maine Conference in Skowhegan

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OUR WORK AND ITS IMPACT

PLANNING FOR AGRICULTURE

In October, 2022, GrowSmart Maine entered into the long-term “Planning for Ag” partnership with the American Farmland Trust in response to the alarming rate of farmland loss in Maine and across America to “low-density residential development” or sprawl. Through the partnership, GrowSmart Maine helps communities address the housing crisis, without undoing the good work to address the climate crisis, and without creating the next crisis of access to farmland and food.

The Community Resilience Partnership

GrowSmart Maine is partnering with towns throughout the state to bolster their resilience to climate change, assisting them in enrolling in the State of Maine’s highly successful Community Resilience Partnership (CRP) and securing vital project funding. This spring, GrowSmart Maine facilitated four Community Resilience Partnership Workshops, bringing together residents to identify local climate resilience needs and prioritize actionable solutions. The workshops were held in Presque Isle, Houlton, Leeds, and Mexico. Each session provided a vital platform for community members to actively shape their town’s resilience planning.

The towns are pursuing projects ranging from updating a Comprehensive Plan (Houlton) and a walkability study (Presque Isle) to installing solar panels (Leeds) and a heat pump and LED lights (Mexico). These projects reflect the diverse ways Maine communities are making progress toward the goals of Maine Won’t Wait.



Downeast Food Systems partners talking through challenges, opportunities, and priority actions at the kickoff event in Ellsworth.

The CRP funds these local efforts through its [Community Action Grants](#) of up to \$75,000 for individual municipalities, or up to \$175,000 for collaborative projects involving two to five communities, with no matching funds required. These funds can be used to implement any of 72 prescribed resilience actions, and serve as a match for other grants.

The Downeast Food Systems Partnership

The Downeast Food System Partnership, a collaborative initiative managed by GrowSmart Maine in conjunction with Healthy Acadia and Sunrise County Economic Council, successfully launched its kick-off meeting on April 17, 2025, at the Woodlawn Barn in Ellsworth. This vital partnership aims to cultivate a more inclusive, innovative, and integrated food system across the Downeast region. The event brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including farmers, processors, distributors, local communities, institutions, and businesses, all committed to strengthening the local food economy and enhancing food access.



Building Community Strength participants working together in Machias

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The kick-off meeting focused on identification of the challenges, opportunities, and priority actions – setting the groundwork for understanding the unique food systems environment in the Downeast and establishing a set of actionable next steps. Looking ahead, the Partnership outlined crucial priority actions: improving transportation and logistics through a coordinated network, investing in shared food system facilities like community commercial kitchens, and enhancing food education in schools to foster a robust local food culture.

Building Community Strength

The Building Community Strength (BCS) program is a community planning capacity-building initiative empowering communities in rural Maine. Many communities lack the planning capacity and resources to address local challenges effectively. The BCS program bridges this gap by providing training and technical assistance to develop and implement local plans that address critical issues like resilience, economic development, affordable housing, and food and farm viability.

The program utilizes a “train-the-trainer” model, where community members from ten towns participate in workshops and receive guidance from a team comprising experienced planners from Sunrise County Economic Council, The Musson Group, North Star Planning, and Eastern Maine Development Corporation. GrowSmart Maine provides additional expertise and manages the program and facilitates connections between these communities and resource organizations, and funding opportunities.

This vital program is designed to equip community leaders from across Maine with the essential knowledge and resources needed to proactively develop municipal policies, projects, and plans. The ten towns participating in this comprehensive initiative are Calais, Danforth, Enfield, Houlton, Machias, Mexico, Presque Isle, Roque Bluffs, Skowhegan, and Van Buren

GrowSmart hosted two workshops in FY25. The first, a two day event which took place in September 2024 in Machias, provided participants with the essential knowledge and resources to develop municipal policies and ordinances that enable housing that meet community needs, while also protecting assets such as farmland, habitat, and open space. It focused on housing and/or conservation issues trainees may be faced with in their communities, and specific tools and strategies for dealing with them. The workshop included sessions on funding and technical assistance opportunities, as well as case studies and site visits.

Building Community Strength communities were then wel-

comed to Skowhegan in April 2025. Following the same format as the prior workshop, over two days, the convening provided participants with knowledge and resources to develop municipal policies, projects, and plans for a proactive approach to local economic development, downtown revitalization, and climate resilience. It focused on issues trainees may be faced with in their communities, and specific tools and strategies for dealing with them. The workshop included sessions on funding and technical assistance opportunities, as well as case studies and site visits.

KENNEBEC BROADBAND PARTNERSHIP

The Kennebec Broadband Partnership (KBP) began work in Kennebec County in January 2023. Federal funding for digital literacy and outreach ends in December 2025. Since inception, we:

- Provided \$83,500 in Digital Equity Stipends for nonprofit organizations and libraries in Kennebec County, investing in their capacity to offer digital literacy services.
- Distributed more than 60 free devices to people to use for education, online health care appointments, job search and applications, and connecting with family and friends.
- Created a coalition of organizations working together to strengthen digital literacy and online safety in the county.
- Provided 11 Fraud and Scam Prevention presentations with 131 people in attendance, helping people stay safe online.

Going forward, local libraries and other nonprofit organizations will be the best places to look for tech help.



Calvin Lewis, Kennebec County Digital Navigator:

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ADVOCACY

Much of our advocacy is focused at the state level, while we support federal initiatives in partnerships, and host local and regional advocacy with statewide impact.

STATE LEVEL POLICY:

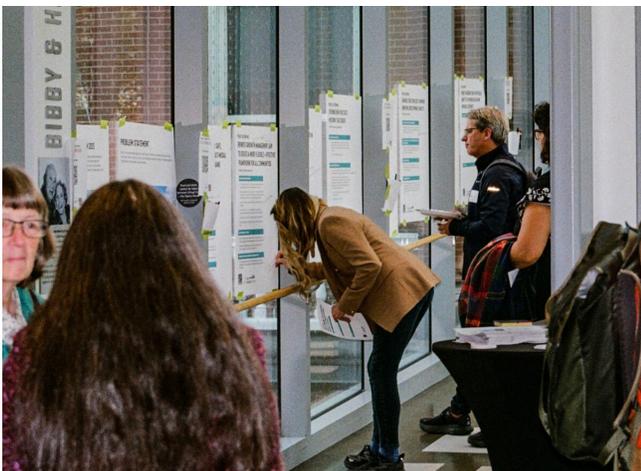
Policy Action 2025

Smart growth defines strategies to encourage development where it makes sense in the long term while protecting unique productive and natural places that define Maine. These strategies include incentives and regulations to encourage projects that reflect the intention of the community. In Policy Action 2025 we co-hosted several working groups focused on relevant policy areas. We also weighed in on bills that align with Policy Action, though developed outside of that process.

Here are three key Policy Action 2025 outcomes of the 2025 session in the 132nd Legislature that result in removing regulatory barriers to development where it makes sense:

Reduce Municipal Parking Requirements that add to the cost of housing: LD 427 significantly narrows municipal ability to do require parking for new residential developments, better reflecting needs of residents in Maine's downtowns and village centers, as it is focused on locally designated growth areas

LD 546 directs the Maine Office of Community Affairs (MOCA) to develop a catalog of pre-approved building types that may include, but are not limited to, single family homes, duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes and mixed-use residential



Summit 2024 attendees contribute to Policy Action 2025

and retail buildings. Municipalities can choose to engage their community in a process of deciding which designs are a fit, and offer streamlined permitting as an incentive to build what the community has said they want.

MaineDOT to Report Progress Toward Implementing Recommendations in the 2025 Public Transit Advisory Council (PTAC) Report. While this title may not be dazzling at first glance, this is a big deal. Ensuring accountability from state agencies is critical to effective deployment of limited public resources. In Policy Action 2025, LD 1359 builds on one of the successes of Policy Action 2023, a bill that strengthened the PTAC by broadening its membership to ensure actionable outcomes, through regular meetings hosted by someone deeply involved in public transit whose work is outside of MaineDOT.

Planning for Agriculture

GrowSmart Maine testified in support of the following bills:

- LD 603, *An Act to Ensure That the Exemption of Certain Agricultural Buildings from the Maine Uniform Building and Energy Code Includes Maple Sugarhouses* adds an additional category of buildings that are not subject to the Maine Uniform Building and Energy Code; buildings used primarily to process or store maple sap or syrup.
- LD 606, *Resolve, to Study Barriers to Financial Assistance Programs for Farmers and Food Producers* authorizes a study of State financial assistance programs for farmers to determine how to increase program effectiveness and benefits for Maine's farm businesses. Particular focus is given to program access for new and emerging farmers and to better aligning application materials, timelines, and procedures.
- LD 1450, *An Act Regarding the Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program* removes several barriers from implementation of the Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program, a voluntary property tax reduction initiative created in 2007 and adopted in Winslow and Monmouth. The goal of the program is to reduce the fiscal burden for participating municipalities that results from new development in rural areas.

LOCAL/REGIONAL ADVOCACY:

GrowSmart worked with **Mainers for Smarter Transportation (M4ST)**, a volunteer-led coalition of individuals and groups that formed to advocate for an alternative to highway expansions in Greater Portland. The group formulated as a response to the Maine Turnpike Association's (MTA) announcement of the Gorham Connector Project - a proposed

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five-mile highway extension that would run through farmland west of Portland and into Gorham. Our advocacy included collaboration on a White Paper that outlined alternatives to highway expansion, publishing an Op-Ed in the Portland Press Herald, and working with town counselors to better understand the implications of highway expansion. On March 6th, MTA announced that they would put the project on hold due to public concerns raised through this process.

FEDERAL ADVOCACY

GrowSmart's federal advocacy takes a collaborative approach, teaming up with organizations across the country with aligned missions to advocate for continued federal support for rural communities. While the adage is true – once you've been to one rural community, you've been to one rural community – it is also true that federal funding through USDA and The Northern Border Regional Commission is critical for rural communities in the state and around the country.

In our role as the State Rural Development Council (SRDC) with the Partners for Rural America (PRA), we signed onto a letter addressed to Secretary Rollins at the Department of Agriculture that offered input into the Department's restructuring. The letter vocalized the importance of SRDCs' role in facilitating rural development from federal funds to local impact, the need for state USDA offices to be adequately staffed, and promoting efficiency through the consolidation of grants and financial assistance.

GrowSmart also joined with a coalition of national, regional, state, local and grassroots organizations working with rural and tribal communities across the United States through the Rural Network to deliver a letter regarding USDA-Rural Development (RD) funding. As Maine's Rural Development Council, GrowSmart is in the position to speak to wide impact that USDA-RD funding creates in Maine's rural communities - from housing to economic development; natural resource protection to building local capacity, maintaining robust funding for USDA-RD programs is vital for the present and future of these towns and regions. In a later letter to Senator Collins, GrowSmart reiterated these points.

CONVENING TO ACTION

WEBINARS

Alternative Housing Models

Panelists: Kate Hambley (Yardsale, Landform Law), Liz Trice (Backyard ADUs), and Matt Peters (Maine Cooperative Development Partners)

Housing isn't just a hot topic – it's the topic on Mainers' minds. As the state wrestles with building housing of all kinds, work in the legislature to lower barriers to development continues, developers eye opportunities to meet demand, and communities are getting scrappy in an effort to close the gap. We're familiar with these headlines, but are you aware of the creative approaches that might be happening in your town? Alternative Housing Models is the first in the GrowSmart Maine webinar series "The House Is Not Enough". Together, we'll hear from panelists about the alternative housing models that communities and organizations are pioneering around the state.

All forums are available on the GrowSmart Maine YouTube channel or by going to the "Webinars" page on our website.

COMMUNITY GUIDES

Community Guides are a free resource that we make available on our website, spotlight in our monthly newsletter, and bring along with us as physical copies at events. These resources are a one to two-page crash course into a specific topic – they span a range of topics related to smart growth and are produced as a response to current events or commonly asked questions. Where we can safely assume that if one community has questions about a topic, others will as well, we make these resources available so that local stakeholders across Maine can make informed decisions.

Two hundred and sixty-four Community Guides were downloaded from our website in FY25. Broadly speaking, total readership is significantly undercounted by downloads alone – tailored selections of Community Guides accompanied staff at events across the state and otherwise made their way into Mainers' hands through a variety of means.

SUMMIT 2024

Smart growth is a comprehensive approach to planning and development that is often approached from a specific angle – housing, transportation, open space and natural resource protection, the list goes on! Our Summit 2024 aimed to pull those components together through the lens of infrastructure.

We Get What We Plan For: How Smart Growth Creates Community, featuring keynote addresses from Dr. Basil Gooden Jr. and Hannah Pingree, invited participants to learn how housing, transportation and utilities, food systems, cultural and natural spaces are interconnected and essential community infrastructure and integration of these assets build sustainable communities.

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